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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON IRAQ

#### Summary

-- Lead stories in all papers today, April 20, continue to focus on developments in Iraq. Reports highlight the arrest of the former Iraqi Minister of Finance and the withdrawal of the U.S. Marines as they handed over the civilian management of Iraq to the U.S. army. Papers highlight the Arab regional conference that was held in Riyadh yesterday, calling for an end to the "occupation" of Iraq and rejecting threats to Syria.

#### Editorial Commentary

-- "Free region of WMD"

Centrist, influential among the elite English daily Jordan Times (04/20) editorializes: "The weapons inspection saga is now a familiar story after the international community saw where and how it led with and ended in Iraq. The UN weapons inspectors never found a trace of any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and now after a month of US occupation, no proof has been found to incriminate Iraq on that count. Today, the same familiar tactics are being directed towards Syria with suggestions that it should allow weapons inspectors in to establish whether it has chemical weapons or not.. Once inspectors are allowed into the country, there is always a risk the United States would never be satisfied with the findings and may end up doing what it has done in Iraq, i.e. using the pretext of its own unconfirmed allegations that chemical weapons are present in Syria, to play havoc with Syrian sovereignty.. Damascus now insists on a UN Security Council resolution that would declare the Middle East a zone free of all types of mass destruction weapons, including of course nuclear capability, which Israel holds claim to.. Double standards in the application of the will of the international community to rid the world of all mass destruction weapons can no longer be accepted or tolerated. Now is the time to take up the Syrian proposal if the United States and other interested countries are serious about eliminating the dangers of such weapons."

-- "No Arab role"

Daily columnist Mohammad Kawash writes on the back page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (04/20): "What happened in Iraq, and previously in Palestine, makes us deal carefully with the Arab position towards hot and serious issues. Today, all Arab countries, without exception, reject and condemn the U.S. threats against Syria.. When the war begins, Damascus will realize that the brotherly Arab countries are incapable of providing any assistance, even helpless about issuing a statement of condemnation against the United States.. We tell our brothers in Syria to completely forget about any Arab support or any joint Arab action in this new crisis that the U.S. administration created. We advise Damascus to understand the changes, to read well the U.S. developments and tendencies, and to quickly move on the political and diplomatic front.. We have washed our hands completely from any genuine Arab action during crises and from any effective Arab role in confronting the Israeli and the American onslaught, and we say there is not Arab role. Yet, this does not mean that we should suffer from helpless, desperation and frustration, because this time we are depending on the role of the people in resisting the foreign occupation. The Palestinian people are still capable of snatching their freedom and independence and the Iraqi people are able to confront the occupation and to protect its wealth."

-- "Those gloating about the fall of Baghdad"

Daily columnist Fahd Fanek writes on the back page of semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (04/20): "Ousting the Baath regime in Iraq allowed those who oppose that regime to cry over democracy and to condemn oppression and dictatorship in an indirect way of welcoming the American occupation of Iraq. What is being written and said is not meant to serve democracy, but to support the American stand and justify the occupation of Iraq.. The freedom that America brought is a freedom to steal, to loot, and to destroy Iraq's treasures, history and heritage.. Democracy cannot be imposed on people by the power of steel, fire, Apaches and Tomahawks. Democrats cannot be led by Ahmad Jalabi, who embezzled millions of dinars from the country that hosted him.. America beat the Iraqi regime militarily, but the people of Iraq are going to beat America politically. While America's military position was raised after the war, its moral position and power collapsed.. What fell in Iraq was not one of the Arab regimes. It was the strategic depth of Jordan and Syria; the high dam that protected the Gulf countries from the Mullahs of Iran; and the last obstacle in the face of eliminating the Palestinian issue."

GNEHM